

Review of Olivier Blanc's
Last Letters: Prisons and Prisoners
of the
French Revolution 1793-1794

Michael J. Gilbert

History 347

Professor Harsanyi

November 19, 2009

Last Letters: Prisons and Prisoners of the French Revolution 1793-1794 is a look at the conditions of the condemned during “The Terror.” While including the last letters of many French citizens, Blanc also fills the reader in on the ins and outs of the system. From communication from the prisons, contraband, living conditions, and many other aspects of prison life, to the methods of prosecution and the people who dispensed justice for the republic, Blanc attempts to cover everything including the very personal thoughts of people on their way to the guillotine so the reader can put themselves as best as they can in that atmosphere.

The book is divided into two parts and the first part is a description of the life in the prisons and the second focuses more on the individuals who were destined to leave the prisons for the scaffold. As it turns out, the quality of life in a Revolutionary prison depended on how much money one had. The prisoners were expected to pay for their stay in the prisons and those that were rich enough also could donate towards the costs of the poorer inmates. Blanc says that there were fifty prisons at this time in Paris and that fifteen of them, which were called *maisons de santé*, were set aside for the rich prisoners.¹ The poorer prisoners were subject to crowded rooms with nothing more than straw on the floor and no sanitary facilities, but the more well to do prisoners could have mattresses, hold meetings with other prisoners, read books, and even write letters to people on the outside. Of course all of the privileges that the wealthier prisoners enjoyed were not without their hitches. The letters they wrote were intercepted and read by their jailors and if they implicated themselves or others in their letters, the prosecutor Antoine-Quentin Fouquier de Tinville could use them for evidence against them. They also had to be weary of spies and informants among them. These “Moutons” were encouraged to and became adept at completely fabricating plots among the prisoners as a means of clearing out prisons. Large

¹ Oliver Blanc, *Last Letters: Prisons and Prisoners of the French Revolution* (New York: Michael di Capua Books, 1987), 8-9.

groups of prisoners could be swiftly condemned and executed in this way.² Of course, when these groups went to the tribunal to be condemned, the informants would miraculously be acquitted. One interesting plot dreamed up by an Italian informant named Manini at the prison Saint-Lazare, was that several prisoners were planning on escaping to not only kill the members of the Committee of Public Safety, but tearing out Robespierre's heart and eating it.³ These and many other dangers proved that despite the creature comforts that the wealthier inmates had, they were always fearful that the end could come at any time.

Blanc includes a chapter in part one of this book for "Money in Prisons of the Terror" that is quite interesting and in some ways sad. It seems that the jailors and even some of the tribunal members were not above taking bribes from prisoners. There were many instances where guards would take money and escort letters to relatives of the prisoners or bring the prisoners contraband. Two very rich prisoners were even offered (forged, unknown to them) passports to Switzerland with Robespierre's signature. The counterfeiter walked into this lightly guarded prison and simply offered them freedom at his price.⁴ In this case, the men refused and died at the guillotine, but the point is that blackmail, bribery, and anything money related was still applicable even at the height of republican radicalism. Blanc writes about Fouquier – Tinville himself:

It has been claimed that two women from Auteuil, the Dames de Boufflers, had escaped certain death thanks to him (Tinville). It seems that it was the private tutor of the Boufflers' children, a friend of Fouquier, who pleaded on their behalf. Yet, despite the efforts of his many enemies, no one has ever been able to prove that the public prosecutor was corrupt. On the other hand, we know that he covered for the weaknesses of Committee members and he has been held responsible for the disappearance of several documents and for literally emptying certain case files.⁵

² Blanc, *Last Letters*, 29.

³ Ibid., 42.

⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁵ Ibid., 76.

Clearly, corruption in the prison system made matters very interesting for everyone.

When I started reading the second part of the book which contained the last letters of the condemned, I was surprised that with the exception of just a few, they were not disparaging or pathetic like one might expect from people who feel as if they are meeting their end unnecessarily. It seems that after coming to the Conciergerie, the final prison in which they waited to be carted to the scaffold from after being condemned in the tribunal, put a sense of acceptance in the prisoners. Most of the letters were written with a longer portion devoted to taking care of business and legal affairs followed by a simple goodbye to loved ones. One man, Millin De LaBrosse, even made a request to Fouquier – Tinville asking for a speedier trial and execution. Despite all the composure most of the letters show in the face of death it is doubtless that many, including Mme Roland, had despaired at their situation in private while putting on a noble face to others. A few of the most interesting letters are ones written by people who seeing they have little left to lose, give everything they've got towards their incarcerators. Antoine-Pierre-Léon Dufresne and Avoye Paville Costard take this course of action in their last letters. Dufresne by writing his last letter to his denunciator, a man called Le Fourdrai:

I take my eternal farewell of you, villain. I don't know whether you did it on purpose. Though I knew you for a scoundrel, I cannot bring myself to believe that you are also a wicked villain. All I can say is that it is the letters I wrote to you that have brought me to the scaffold. If it was not wickedness, your turn will come soon enough.⁶

Costard, an unapologetic Catholic woman proclaims: "Long live the King? Long live the King! Long live the King! Don't pretend to believe that I am mad, no, I am not. I believe everything I have just written down and sign it in my blood."⁷ Out of the collection Blanc has provided us with, these two examples are exceptional. There are a few that are more moving, like between a

⁶ Blanc, *Last Letters*, 143.

⁷ Ibid., 200.

parent and child, a son and a mother, and between lovers, but for the most part the letters are composed in a manner that would suggest that the writer was composed and compliant with the path they were destined to go down, even in the letters of popular figures like Lavoisier and Marie-Antoinette there is not anger or self pity, but instead, resignation.

Blanc's commentary coupled with the actually letters makes this book very interesting because it makes the reader realize that the time during "The Terror" was not just this inescapable tidal wave that brought civilization in Paris to a halt. Even the prisoners had some options available to them, especially if they were rich. The letters of the condemned on their way to the guillotine also give the reader a sense that these people had just grown to almost tolerate the state of things in Paris as well. Judging by their letters, they seemed to have hope as they wrote to their families that somehow what they were going through was all part of a natural course of some kind. This is what struck me the most about this book. Could I or could many of us face that ride to the scaffold like they did?

Bibliography

Blanc, Olivier. *Last Letters: Prisons and Prisoners of the French Revolution 1793-1794*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Michael di Capua Books Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987.